

THE UX UNIVERSITY: EMOTIONALLY SITUATING STUDENT EXPERIENCE IN A TRANSITION BETWEEN PROTEST AND POST-PROTEST MARKETIZATION

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the critical role emotions, feelings and affect play in situating student experience during a major transition from rebellion against fees to an apparent capitulation to the marketization of the higher education (HE) sector. The discussion begins by shining a light on the “viscerality” of student fees protests in London in 2010. Through imagery and oral histories, the protests appear to comprise of joyful collective and contagious encounters, disobedient optimism, riotous anger, and eventual violence. Yet, following defeat in Parliament, the visceral intensity of rebellion seems to have been exhausted. Indeed, following a summary of the marketization of the HE sector, the second part of the article introduces the concept of the UX University. As follows, for many universities struggling to survive in an overly competitive marketplace for student numbers, UX is supposed to provide an edge. UX principles have therefore been incorporated throughout the student experience journey, including the tracking of emotional touchpoints that inform managerial metrics and enable the convergence of learning experiences, market design, and employee performance. In short, the UX university is significantly shaped by the emotional branding of student experience. Drawing on the work of Neetu Khanna (2020), the article concludes by defining the shift away from the viscerality of rebellion toward a digitally enhanced fattening of felt affect, as an “evisceration” of the student (user) experience.

KEY WORDS

Student Experience; Visceral; Evisceration; UX; University; Fees; Protest; Rebellion; Marketization

INTRODUCTION

The central focus of this article is on the critical role emotions, feelings and affect play in situating student experience during a major shift from rebellion against fees to an apparent capitulation to the marketization of the higher education sector. Before detailing the processes and implication of marketization, the discussion begins by shining a light on the viscerality of student protests against the introduction of £9000 yearly fees occurring in London in 2010. Referring to imagery and oral histories from the student movement, experiences of these

protests appear to comprise of powerful communicative contagions of collective action, joyful encounters, rebellious optimism, riotous anger, violence, and a certain nostalgia for historical student movements (Myers, 2017). In addition to the older modes of communication through which emotions, feelings and affect spread in the 1960s, the 2010 protests were channelled through social media and mobile networks, which have been noted for their capacity for affective contagion (Sampson, 2012, 2020; Karppi & Crawford, 2015). Yet, despite the significance of these networks in stirring the protests' initial emotional, feely and affective intensity, eventual defeat in Parliament, the subsequent introduction of substantial fees, and spiralling student debt, have, it seems, exhausted the visceral energy of rebellion. The protest movement has indeed given way to an “eviscerated” student experience - a term borrowed from Khanna’s (2020) work to conceptualize the effects of marketization in the university sector.

Along these lines, this article concurs with a number of critical approaches that similarly grasp the considerable role of market forces and influence of managerialism in a complex transformation of the student experience (e.g., Carey, 2013; Palfreyman & Tapper, 2016; NG, 2016). As follows, it is contended that the student-learner has mutated into a customer or consumer of a service, which has had, sequentially, a negative impact on curriculum development and critical thinking skills, for example (Gibbs, 2018).

By adding to the discussion, this article further points to the rise of a digitally inspired experience marketing approach in the higher education sector referred to here as the UX University. In the context of persona studies, the concept of the UX University corresponds with ideas from technological design regarding how users can be transformed by online exposure to the digital design industry’s use of user centred techniques (Marshall & Barbour, 2015), including the use of UX personas (Nielsen, 2018). The explicit aim of such techniques is to “involve the end-users in the process of design and production,” but user-centric strategies like personas also implicitly configure users of software products into consumers modelled according to certain “types and probabilities of likely uses of a technology product” (Marshall & Barbour, 2015, p. 7). Along similar lines, then, this article explores a broader implementation of UX techniques that have become endemic in marketing and managerial strategies across the HE sector, requiring students to participate as end-users in the market design of a model of higher education. This approach is marked by two characteristics:

- (1) student-users function as one of a number of solutions to increased competition for numbers in the sector. As a result, they are supposed to participate in the co-creation and positive emotional branding of their own experience.
- (2) as higher education becomes increasingly designed and controlled by marketers and UX principles, the student experience increasingly resembles a mode of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), wherein the desire to protest has been mostly emptied of feeling and substituted with a marketized fantasy good life.

The subsequent discussion is divided into three parts. Firstly, it traces the trajectory of student experience from the viscosity of the 2010 protests to contemporary marketized visual portrayals of student life in the UX University. Secondly, the article draws on academic and business marketing literature to examine emotional branding strategies employed by universities to gain a competitive edge in the market. Finally, the goal is to cultivate critical awareness and resilience to UX mechanisms which have provoked a shift from viscosity to evisceration, as well as engendering political apathy through the cruelly optimistic attachments marketers establish between student experience and a fantasy good life.

A Word on Method

This critique of the UX University is couched in a Spinozist new materialist approach focused on three modes of experience: emotional, feely, and affective (e.g., see Massumi cited in Shouse,

2005). These modes are not discrete or conflated into a general concept of emotional experience but are viewed instead as processes involving atmospherics, emergences, and intensities. In other words, while emotions and feelings can be grasped as personal experiences, often registered somatically, and mentally, and socially shared between bodies, new materialism regards affect differently since it is composed of pre-personal atmospheric forces outside of individual bodies. The concept of pre-personal affect is consequently understood as part of a three-way process in which, (1), feelings are subjectively felt sensations, possibly considered autobiographical, since they will already be registered in a bodily index, while (2), emotions are cognitive expressions or broadcasts of these felt sensations, while both emerge from (3), pre-personal encounters with the potentiality and intensity of affect.

This analytical procedure could begin at any point in this three-step process or switch between modes. For example, this study commences with a comparison of emotional cognitions observed in expressions of anger in images of protesting crowds, on one hand, and the faked fun and excitement of marketing imagery, on the other. It then traces these emotions to emergent felt sensations and the viscera of experience. Heuristically, however, the intensity and potential of affect always comes before sensation and cognition, which is to say, affect is always outside of consciousness and therefore pre-personal (Massumi, 1995, p. 85).

The emergence of a pre-personal viscera of experience has some significant similarities and differences with this journal's focus on persona studies, particularly as understood in a digital culture context. On one hand, the social distribution of online emotions and feelings can be psychologically experienced as personal. They can be, in terms Goffman established, privately or publicly masked, as such (Goffman, 1959; Barbour et al, 2014). Indeed, in some realms of emotion science, although apparently detectable, public emotions can be readily negotiated and disguised (Ekman et al, 1980). On the other hand, though, affect theory adds a pre-personal intensity to experience that arguably persists outside of the "personalized and negotiated presentation of the self" (Barbour et al, 2014). In short, affect cannot be registered in a meaningful (cognitive) sense in consciousness until it emerges as a felt, emotional experience.

Unsurprisingly, this pre-personal zone of nonconscious experience has attracted criticism, even from those sympathetic with affect theory's rejection of cognitive bias. For example, Hayles (2017, pp. 65-85) has criticized the new materialist's disregard of conscious awareness in felt embodied experiences. Moreover, the author who inspired this paper's use of the terms *viscerality* and *evisceration*, Khanna (2020, p. 25), diverges from Spinozist new materialism since its suspension of meaning renders affect outside of subjective experience. Certainly, *viscerality* and *evisceration* do infer a somatic logic of sense that is either internal or external to (or removed from) bodies. However, while the manner by which nonconscious experience interacts with meaning, language, and the conscious sense of self, is of course significant, it is also a realm of theory that is still up for grabs (e.g., Sampson, 2017; Hayles & Sampson, 2018).

One reason why it is important to question cognitive bias comes to the fore in a problem inherent to the popular and academic understanding of social movement dynamics. There has been a historical tendency to mistakenly associate, as such, overly emotional crowds with collective irrationality, which has, to some extent, persisted in approaches to digital culture (Sampson, 2012). Emotional crowds are often discursively depicted as foolish, delusional, vacillating, frenzied, and chaotic. This association between crowds, emotions and mindlessness has traditionally been linked to notions of collective psychosis, loss of control, disorder, mobs, and revolt. This is a lingering perspective, rooted in outdated crowd theory, exemplified by Gustave Le Bon (1895), who argued that rational individuals become emotionally unintelligent when absorbed into unruly collectives. Consequently, emotional crowds are seen as dangerous

and easily manipulated by leaders skilled in hypnotic crowd control (Sampson, 2012, pp. 79-80).

Le Bon's now obsolete account of the crowd overlooks at least two important considerations. First, the relationship between collective emotional expressions, feelings, affect, cognition, and social action is complex and needs to be carefully examined. Again, relating these complexities to notions of private and public personae, we can turn to the work of Le Bon's contemporary, the French sociologist, Gabriel Tarde, whose mapping of the trajectory of a private sense of self into a public realm of identity, involves a fascinating distinction made between a mostly illusory sense of self and a mimetic self (Sampson, 2020b). As follows, the former is a psychological sense of self which seems to mask the latter socially blurred self-other composite. There are some interesting parallels here between Tarde and Carl Jung's conception of persona described by Marshall and Barbour (2015, p. 3) as...

The arbitrary segment of the collective psyche... a mask that feigns individuality, making others and oneself believe that one is individual, whereas one is simply acting a role through which the collective psyche speaks.

Second, questions arising about the exact locus of political control are often purposefully blurred and partisan. In other words, whether or not it is the revolting crowd itself or the authorities attempting to contain it that eventually loses control is always questionable. Certainly, moving away from the influence of popular crowd theory, this discussion notes how different understandings of the nexus between emotion, protest, and collective action emerge from social movement research in the 1990s. These approaches share a few similarities with new materialism since they too propose a shift away from prevalent cultural analyses of social movements, which have distinct cognitive orientations, to a consideration of emotions. For example, James Jasper (1998) explores the significant role of emotion in the cultures of protest, but expresses concerns about the dominance of culturally oriented research that marginalizes and portrays emotions as irrational compared to cognitive rationality. In contrast, Jasper argues that, without emotion, social action might not occur at all (p. 398). While drawing on different theoretical tools to those used in new materialism, and in effect, relying on a generalized mode of emotion, Jasper defiantly argues that protest movements are not irrational. Protesting crowds are, he says, guided toward a social rationale – a “feeling-thinking” channelled through reflex emotions, urges, moods, affective commitments, and moral emotions (Vogler, 2021, p. 270).

More recently, social movement researchers have highlighted the influence of Raymond Williams's "Structures of Feeling" thesis on the early shift towards affective sensibilities in cultural analysis, exemplified by Larry Grossberg's work on audiences (Frenzel et al., 2014). For example, by approaching protests as "sites of affect" one can better understand how sensations and feelings shape people's perspectives towards others, objects, and ideas (463). This approach more readily aligns with the new materialist understanding of affect, distinguishing it from emotions and feelings, as such. Indeed, the cultural analysis of social movements is often interpreted through the lenses of language, meaning, and representation, yet following new materialism, these sites of affect are approached as pre-linguistic and pre-discursive (463), as well as pre-personal and nonrepresentational.

The references to visceral imagery of protest and eviscerated marketized images of student experience in this discussion necessitates a further clear distinction between representation and nonrepresentation. On one hand, then, related in many ways to representational approaches developed in cultural analysis and semiotics, representations are also features of cognitive models of the mind where they appear as functions in information

processing. Representations of this kind are internalized; visualized in thought, encoded/decoded, processed, retrieved, and stored in short and long-term memory. Cognitive scientists working in human computer interaction (HCI), for example, have even theorized that mental models of this kind can be distributed through collaborative groups (Rogers & Ellis, 1994). On the other hand, collective expressions of protest and marketized imagery can be grasped as visceral aesthetics emerging from what have been termed affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2009). These atmospherics are distinct from the culturally inscribed images of representational theory just as they are the mental models of cognitive science. Along these lines, affective atmospheres help us to grasp nonrepresentational moments, and collective affects (78-80), like the involuntary mimetic shocks, which ripple through a collective body, as nonsignifying events, outside of individual consciousness.

In summary, then, protests and marketization can trigger a range of emerging felt sensations and lead to visible emotions, including, for example, images of anger, contempt, indifference or faked joy and excitement. These emotional expressions are culturally represented, as such. Nevertheless, while images of student experience can depict the collective emotional contagions of a crowd, or represent the empty emotions generated by marketing, crucially both images can be traced to affective atmospherics outside of representation.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE: 2010



Figure 1. Photo Steve Parsons/PA Wire

The 2010 student fees protests were marked by emotional expressions on all sides of the political spectrum. As widely accessible archived media coverage shows, mainstream politicians and media outlets, mostly aligned with marketization ideology, articulated their outrage, and widely criticized the protests. Various clashes between the students and authorities were aggressive, and eventually turned violent, particularly the occupation of the Conservatives HQ at Millbank Tower on November 10th. These events shocked the police, the government, and even the moderate left-leaning leadership of the National Union of Students (NUS). The crowd at Millbank were considered by some to be out of control. The right-wing *Daily Mail*, for example, blamed "militants from far-Left groups" for manipulating middle-class students, college kids, and school pupils, and driving them into a frenzy (Gill, 2010). According to this discourse, the previously peaceful protest was transformed into a riotous mob through external, manipulative influences, resulting in acts of violence. Similarly, Aaron Porter (2010), the NUS president at the time, and a member of the Labour Party, acknowledged the success of the organized protests but severely criticized the actions of a small minority seeking to hijack the movement for their own agendas.

These descriptions of an uncontrollable crowd were seen by many within the protest movement as a political deception. Matt Myers (2017), in his account of the student revolt, highlights the historical discourse of condemning "extremist minorities" hijacking "legitimate" protests, a narrative previously used by the NUS to criticize the 1968 student protests (45). Yet, Myers's, and other similar accounts, further illustrate that, unlike 1968, the 2010 student protests provided a platform for a diverse generation affected by austerity measures. There are, as such, two significant factors to consider with regard to the influence of this group. Firstly, among the middle-class students, there was a significant presence of inner-city sixth formers who had a more aggressive and violent perspective. Myers makes the point that this group already seemed to hold an "anti-government" and "anti-police" stance, driven by a "street-politics understanding" without direct affiliation with any political organizations (45-46). Despite their lack of formal political representation, this group played a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of the protest. Journalist Dan Hancox's (2020) observations resonate with Myers's account, noting the influential presence of a diverse and more confrontational group of young inner-city college kids alongside the mostly white, middle-class university students. This former group, aged 16-18, were particularly angered by the government's decision to abolish the £30-a-week Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), a grant that supported essential needs for education. This group, mostly overlooked in media coverage, struggled to be heard in Parliament as the cancellation of EMA did not even go to a vote. Nonetheless, they played a significant role in turning the protest movement into a more intense and violent social action.

Secondly, the EMAs engaged with the university students by contributing to the development of a distinct social media culture. This was a culture that extended beyond the NUS's preferred platforms, like Twitter and Facebook, to include the influential Blackberry messaging service, which would later play a conspicuous role in the urban unrest of summer 2011, known as the England Riots (Myers, 2017, p. xiv). Indeed, looking back to 2010, the digital images and oral histories capturing the protests have now become historical cultural representations of those events. They evoke similar images from past protests. Beyond their archival cultural significance, however, these images and oral accounts also played an *operational* role in fuelling the protest movement on social media and Blackberry during the protests. Images, texts, and voices spread via crowds, platforms, and networks, bypassing both the social media platforms utilized by NUS organizers to coordinate a peaceful march and the filters of a hostile right-wing media. As images and utterances of protest spread via these networks, they began to attract more participants than the organizers had anticipated. People were organizing independently, ensuring that the social movement grew progressively beyond the NUS's political boundaries (Myers, 2017 p. 33). On the day of Millbank, the crowd numbers unexpectedly swelled to over 50,000. This number included middle-class students and their bohemian lecturers along with the EMAs, many of whom learned of the detour through their mobiles and went with the flow from Trafalgar Square to Tory HQ.

The detour to Millbank was driven by a spontaneous desire fuelled by anger over marketization, fees, cuts, and further provoked by violent confrontations with an intimidating state police. It was not a result of a militant hijacking but rather an expression of something greater than individual actions. On the day of Millbank, student protesters described a sense of excitement and anticipation in the air, as if something significant was about to happen (Myers, 2017, p 36). Instead of grasping Millbank through the tropes of popular crowd theory, and seeing it as emotionally out of control, a new materialist understanding grasps these events as steered by the atmospherics of protest. These atmospheres provide fertile ground for the potential of affect to be translated into felt experiences of conflict and collaboration, and expressed as emotions that spread through crowds, networks, platforms, to be acted upon. Energized and mobilized by network connectivity, the visceral experience of the protests became transformative, producing bodily changes and stirring further transmissions of affect. The intensity of atmospheric fluctuations of agitation, antagonism, and anticipation spread

throughout the movement making cognitive and affective components blur into each other. Millbank was indeed an affective moment where the traditional distinction between individual cognitive rationality and the irrational mob collapsed, giving way to a collective affect with a mind of its own.

For the people involved in the protests, Millbank was not seen as a moment when the crowd lost control but instead it was a cardinal point where the Coalition Government, the NUS, and the police, lost control of the political agenda, the student movement, and the streets, respectively (Mason cited in Myers, 2017 p. 31). Along these lines, Hancox (2020) argues that Millbank offered a rupture in what Mark Fisher terms Capitalist Realism, leading to the emergence of a new attitude among protesters. It signalled to others that shifting the mainstream political discourse away from neoliberal marketization would not happen within the confines of Parliament alone. Instead, it was the creativity, energy, and grassroots activism of the student protests, combined with online innovations and offline mobilization, that provided momentum to the Left in 2015 after the apathy of the New Labour project.

Looking at the higher education (HE) sector nearly fourteen years after Millbank, the struggle against the marketization of higher education seems to be lost. But is it all doom and gloom now? While Hancox's metaphorical connection between the smashing of windows at Millbank Tower and the "shattering of capitalist realism" may now seem somewhat exaggerated (see figure 1), 2010 does offer a glimpse into an alternative reality, albeit a minor fissure in a future dominated by market design. Certainly, in his K-Punk blog, Fisher notes the potential for the disproportionate effects of the rush and precariousness of Millbank (Fisher cited in Myers, 2017 p. 9; see also Fisher, 2009 pp. 80-81). However, despite these glimmers of optimism, alongside the physical and intellectual efforts of the protest, the viscerality of the student movement appears to have given way to the effects of rampant marketization. Along these lines, to fully comprehend the significance of this current atmospheric transformation of the sector, it is necessary to chart the trajectory of marketization itself, before considering the emotional, feely, and affective dimensions of a marketized student experience.

THE MARKETIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The global marketization of education has a trajectory that has been traced back to the 1970s, when Milton Friedman proposed a free market approach to public education in the US, envisioning schools operating like grocery stores (Hickman, 2019). In reality, though, the sector was already competing for numbers at this time. By the 1980s, marketization had become such a prominent topic in higher education research it was integrated into broader debates in US academia (Elken, 2019). In the European context, the influence of marketing in education is a more recent development. It can be tracked to efforts to introduce a fees system in the UK in the 1980s. Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government argued for funding higher education through student loans rather than the taxpayer, marking a significant ideological and economic shift compared to post-WW2 UK policy, which since the 1940s viewed all education as a public good to be financed centrally (Palfreyman & Tapper, 2016). Nonetheless, subsequent expansion of the university sector in the UK led to a decline in per-student expenditure and necessitated an increased reliance on fee-paying international students. Another key moment arrived with The Dearing Report in 1997, commissioned under John Major's government and published at the beginning of Tony Blair's New Labour era, it argued for a fees-based system. Tuition fees were subsequently introduced in 1998, and by 2006-07 they had reached £3000 per year.

During this period of marketization, researchers began to critically examine its impact on higher education institutions. For example, it was argued that marketization brought about a "hard" managerialism and a shift towards command and control (Webb, 2004). Universities were now marketing themselves as businesses, competing in a global market, leading to the

recruitment of the first marketing directors. Competition replaced cooperation, and performance indicators, budget-capping, and customer orientation became increasingly emphasized.

Research also explored the influence of marketing ideologies on fee-paying students. One study (Lomas, 2007) examined the perceptions of academic staff regarding whether students were now seen as customers, and if so, what impact was that having on the sector. The majority of interviewees, depending on their discipline and university, expressed discomfort with the growing influence of customer-oriented marketization (42). They recognized that this approach was generally supported by senior managers rather than academic staff (*ibid*). The impact of marketization on subject areas was generally perceived negatively too, with concerns expressed about the prospect of students having the power to shape the syllabus and teaching methods (39-40). There were also apprehensions about the commodification of knowledge, as universities focused on targets and quantity rather than quality, potentially undermining the importance of critical thinking (39). Another argument against marketization in higher education regarded the student as customer concept as a recipe for disaster. The undue influence of money on curriculum decisions can, it was argued, hinder the formation of the individual and diminish the university as a whole (Barnett cited in Lomas, 2007).

Not all academics viewed the customer-oriented student concept as entirely negative. Some believed that publishing student satisfaction data could positively impact teaching and learning (38). Others, particularly those in post-92 institutions that rely more on teaching income, saw marketization as a way to make their institution more attractive and increase student numbers (42).

After 2010, research starts to focus more on managing expectations and framing the student experience as a consumer of a service (Durkin et al., 2012). Indeed, the competitive landscape in higher education has increased the complexity of decision-making for prospective students (155). Students are encouraged to develop commercial awareness so they can play more effective roles in determining the quality of the education they receive (156-7). The introduction of customer-oriented benchmarks, such as the National Student Survey (NSS) in 2005, and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2016, provide contested measures of student satisfaction. Notably, the formal collection of student-consumer data occurs at the same time as a number of online forums and social media platforms also appear enabling the sharing of often emotional opinions about institutions that circulate outside of the control of marketers. Similarly, new approaches to higher education marketing shift the focus from strategic aspects, such as market position and selling subject specialisms, to tactical responses, aiming to engage customers, ensure satisfaction, and produce positive (and negate negative) social media trends (Farhat et al, 2021).

Critical approaches to marketization do not end after 2010. Philip Carey (2013), for example, contends that developments in the HE sector are an extension of widespread free market principles into public service management (251). As a result, universities now view students as a source of income, supporting further marketization of their services (*ibid*). The power dynamic between students, academics, and institutions had already been couched in questions concerning whether or not students are consumers of a service or its product (Fisher, 2009 p. 42). Developing on similar lines, Carey (2013) argues that student participation in feedback mechanisms is necessary because management-led, free-market systems require the co-creation of the product.

What this discussion adds to such critical perspectives is twofold. Firstly, it emphasizes this trend toward co-creation marketing strategies, raising further questions about whether or not being a co-producer of an education service actually empowers students, as marketers

claim, or as Carey (2013) argues, merely embeds them in another manifestation of free market managerialism. Secondly, it flags a further profound shift towards a user experience (UX) paradigm in higher education, which extends the concepts of student consumers and customers to that of a user embedded in a service. Ostensibly, UX marketing strategies are primarily modes of commodification; that is to say, through user feedback mechanisms, the market extracts value from student experiences so they can be sold on to prospective students. UX marketing managers, and their social media teams, also play an increasing role in the positive emotional branding of student experience.

Significantly, then, in contrast to the visceral aesthetic of 2010, the emotional branding of student experience becomes a superficial expression of fun and excitement that becomes detached from intellectual pursuits and critical thinking. Moreover, this branded version of student success always seems to trump the unthinkable possibility of academic failure. Indeed, rather than address barriers to academic and employment success, like those compounded by vast inequality gaps in UK universities, the UX University's emotional branding of the student experience functions to compete in the marketplace while also eradicating the possibility of an alternative.

THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE: POST-2010



Figure 2: Source <https://www.kent.ac.uk/strategy/education-and-student-experience>

The viscera of student experience have been transformed into a ubiquitous digital image of a superficially flourishing good life. This image is primarily produced by university marketing teams and distributed through various media channels, including university websites, social media platforms, physical advertisements, and other PR mechanisms. It is debatable if this image of experience actually features authentic students, students paid to pose, or professional models pretending to be happy students. But, although authenticity has often been cited as a key factor in the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), its role in experience marketing seems diminished in this case. The image of the thriving student experience is not limited to the UK either. It is an increasingly standardized globally image with evident cultural and representational significance, as such. Fabien Cannizzo and Sara James (2020) analyse the influence of marketization on the imagery used to target potential students in Australia, for example, noting how this image depicts students as consumers of stimulating experiences, portraying universities as adventures with exotic travel, camaraderie, and exciting extracurricular activities. University advertisements use the image to persuade prospective students that enrolling in a university course offers “not just an education but an enjoyable way of life” (ibid). The image focuses on visual depictions of unexpected student experiences on campus, emphasizing pleasurable lifestyles, and social interactions, often occurring in non-academic venues like swanky coffeeshops, and restaurants set in lush campus locations (ibid).

Cannizzo and James point to a marketing strategy that contributes to the active formation of a student's subjective identity. Drawing on the reflexive project of the self (Giddens, 1991), - a notable influence on persona studies (Barbour and Marshall, 2015) - their study proposes that the image evidences the demanding and anxiety-inducing requirement for students to persistently individualize themselves, through self-reflection, making choices, and adapting to constant change. The project of the self also involves a commodification of self, established through presenting "fantasies of self-actualisation and lifestyles through which to narrate one's life trajectory" (ibid).

Arguably, though, the image of student experience does more than merely represent the need to form a subjective self, organised around cognitive capacities like internal-reflection and decision-making. The affective transmission of such an image also feeds into the production of a new atmospheric, operating on nonrepresentational registers of experience. This is a rendering of experience that is, in part, comparable to the image of 2010, but unlike the visceral aesthetic of the anti-fees movement, it is an eviscerated image of experience. The image is designed to entice prospective students to sign up to the flourishing good life at university, against an invisible backdrop of increasing competition for student numbers, high tuition fees and spiralling debt.

As follows, in addition to the cultural and economic subjectifications of student life represented in this image, it is significant to further note the mobilizations of emotional branding and experiential marketing involved in its production. These practices evidence the increasing power of UX marketing managers who deploy emotion and experience, along with social media tools and co-creation methods to determine these new atmospheres.

THE EMOTIONAL BRANDING OF STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The marketization of higher education has transformed the sector from a secure public sector realm shielded from competitive market dynamics into a service industry. This realization emphasizes the need for the active involvement of two transformed roles in the university: (1) the university itself, which has become a service provider and higher education brand; and (2) the student, who has become a customer, consumer, and/or service user. Consequently, there has been a growing research interest in exploring the value of applying branding and marketing concepts to the sector, particularly those that prioritize emotions and experience, and have proven effective in the business world (Durkin et al, 2012). The aim is to gain a competitive advantage in the business of attracting students to enrol in courses by way of understanding the student's emotional and experiential journey. This is not a level playing field. Arguably, for high-ranking, established universities, with strong brands and high levels of engagement - as evidenced by indicators of student satisfaction - emotional ties, loyalty, and strong recruitment are already in place. However, competition is generally more intense across most other parts of the sector, requiring institutions with less resources to increase spending on hiring marketers, developing marketing campaigns on social media, and building new facilities.

It is also important to note that the concepts that inform emotional branding strategies applied in higher education are challenging since marketing campaigns often assume the primacy of newer experience and emotion-oriented approaches, while downplaying conventional strategies that focus on sector positioning, intellectual subject matter, facts, and reason (NG, 2016). This assumption is generally based on a fairly crude estimation of the relationship between emotions and reason established in the brain sciences, as exemplified by Antonio Damasio's (1994) work, for example. Damasio proposes that emotions and feelings are not irrational intrusions upon reason. He sees them instead as integral parts of somatic networks that set in motion cognitive decisions (xii). While the extent to which emotional marketing approaches effectively leverage these ideas from neuroscience may be limited and

problematic, there is a prevalent tendency to refer to an oversimplified version of Damasio's emotional brain thesis, which can often erroneously separate out emotions from reason. For instance, experts in emotional branding, such as Marc Gobé (2010), tend to dilute the notion of the emotional brain by arguing that consumer passion is not cultivated through rational arguments based on tangible or symbolic benefits, but rather through empathetic understanding and a sense of community among brand users. This kind of marketing perspective reflects how emotional brand theory uses a reductive Damasio-inspired concept to suggest that consumers are not primarily thinking beings that experience emotions; instead, they are primarily emotional beings that engage in thinking.

The introduction of emotional branding and experiential marketing in higher education has, nonetheless, generated much interest in the concept of emotional touchpoints, which are said to occur throughout the student's journey (Khanna et al., 2014). These touchpoints encompass various stages of the higher education experience, starting from website interactions, social media marketing, open days, application processes, admissions, enrolment, course engagement, graduation, alumni events, and more. The effective programming, design, and management of touchpoints over an extended period is supposed to enable the conversion of positive experiences into tangible sales transactions (Voss & Zomerdijk cited in Khanna et al., 2014 pp. 122-123). As a result, marketing researchers and professionals are increasingly focused on analysing and redesigning these experiential moments throughout the student's university journey. Similar to experiential services in the commercial sector, touchpoints in higher education also provide crucial data points for measuring and acting upon metrics such as footfall, dwell time, revenue growth, customer satisfaction, and loyalty (ibid). Higher education institutions, like other experiential service providers, use digital technologies to drive these metrics with the aim of encouraging customer engagement with their brand, leading to affirmative word-of-mouth and valuable amplified reach on social media (Khanna et al. 2014, p. 139).

Notably, there has been a transformation in digital platform design practices in the sector. In the late 1990s, the requirement was a basic web presence, featuring images of main buildings, details about the university's intellectual pursuits, a prospectus, and contact information. With the advent of a UX paradigm, university marketers and web teams are currently expected to purposefully design, or buy in, specific digital experiences that foster long-term engagement with students through an array of platforms and connected on-campus interactions. Following the principles of emotional branding and experience design theories, researchers increasingly recognize the significance of sensory and social stimulation with these digital platforms as key drivers of marketing success (Farhat, 2021).

Again, the perceived dichotomy between emotional and intellectual content, which is often assumed to be conflicting, becomes a prominent feature in studies focused on facilitating and sustaining brand experience through digital and social media. For example, encounters with digitalized experiences encompass interactions described in one study as engagements with "brand affect" (Farhat et al., 2021). The authors conclude that relying solely on intellectual brand experience on a university website will not generate significant brand engagement, since students perceive intellectual activities like learning and problem-solving as experiences they will primarily undertake in the physical rather than the virtual environment (123). Consequently, it is assumed that brand affect, rather than intellectual content, is the driving force behind brand engagement. The conventional core promise of higher education institution brands, which centres around providing competitive intellectual experiences on campus, may create conflicting perceptions when it comes to the content expectations for university social media feeds.

The potential shift from emphasizing the intellectual core business of universities to prioritizing marketing concepts like brand affect has understandably sparked a level of critical research interest. Carl Jon Way Ng (2016 p. 46), for instance, conducts a nuanced textual analysis of HE corporate branding strategies in Singapore, perceiving a transition from a focus on "fact" and "reason" to a broader approach centred around "experience/emotion-oriented" marketing and branding. On one hand, the author argues that this shift can be seen as a response to a levelling of hierarchical institution-student relationships and could be seen as beneficial in meeting student learning needs (59). Such a position echoes market logic insofar as it poses a familiar question: *why shouldn't students feel positive about their higher education choices?* However, on the other hand, branding student experiences in terms of affect risks overemphasizing the university as the sole source of emotional and experiential fulfilment, creating high expectations among student customers (ibid). These risks are further compounded by the potential detriment of emotional branding to an education system that prioritizes fun and excitement over industry and effort, potentially compromising educational standards to prioritize customer satisfaction (ibid).

The conceptual positioning of brand affect in this separation between reason and emotion perpetuates the aforementioned flawed distinctions between cognitive rationality and emotional irrationality. It is, nonetheless, a recurrent distinction not only made in emotional branding practices, but also repeated in applied academic research in this area. There are two main concerns arising from this alignment of the business of experience marketing and research concepts developed in academic marketing literature that draw on emotions. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge how marketization of this kind has attracted the attention of a digital design/marketing industry looking to sell user experience (UX) principles to the HE sector. To be sure, we can observe an increase in emotional and experiential branding activities associated with what can be referred to as the UX University. Secondly, this shift coincides with a growing number of marketers (from academia and industry) well versed in these practices and currently assuming strategic managerial positions within the sector.

THE UX UNIVERSITY

By examining various expressions of interest in higher education from UX designers and consultants, it becomes apparent that UX principles, commonly used in online services and products such as Amazon and Netflix, are increasingly incorporated into the market design of universities at all levels (O'Connor, 2020). This trend is aligned to a general prevailing deficit model applied to higher education by the digital design industry, which calls for the integration of UX into every aspect of university life while simultaneously criticizing the current limited and clunky inclusion of technology in the current student experience orientation. In short, the digital design industry sees an exploitable gap between the tech-savvy student service user, and the digitally bereft experience they might encounter at some universities (Ellucian, 2018). Undoubtedly, it seems, there has never been a more critical time for higher education to prioritize the end-user experience, considering the growing engagement and obsession of the student customer base with digital brands and UX (Ibid).

As follows, designers and marketers argue that applying UX to higher education offers a number of tangible competitive advantages for institutions. Firstly, a fully integrated UX University can gain a competitive edge by acknowledging the high expectations of these tech-savvy students regarding digital experiences (ibid). UX principles can thereafter become embedded in the concept of the student as a user-consumer, where universities not only compete with other higher education providers but also strive to meet the standards set by users and consumers of digital technologies (ibid). Within this context, students are primarily modelled as users of digital devices that facilitate most of their discoveries and engagements with new brands (O'Connor, 2021). Consequently, universities must effectively manage a

consistent digital brand identity throughout the student experience journey. The unambiguous marketing rationale at play here argues that placing the student-user's digital experience at the core of the higher education business and delivering a good UX can serve as a powerful differentiator for institutions seeking to stand out from the competition (Renk, 2018). For some marketers, this entails applying the same UX design principles used for software products to enhance the learning environment (ibid). It is further claimed that implementing UX best practices ensures an intuitive user experience that seamlessly guides prospective students towards desired outcomes, supporting the business goals of educational institutions, and highlighting key aspects of a prospect's enrolment journey (O'Connor, 2018).

Secondly, higher education institutions are encouraged to incorporate UX principles throughout the entire student experience journey. On one hand, the initial online interaction a student has with an institution can potentially "make or break their first impression" (Renk, 2018). However, it is important to note that managing impressions through UX is not solely limited to the digital experience, as students inevitably bring certain expectations to campus. Therefore, UX extends across the entire experiential journey, encompassing online application, enrolment, registration, and even physical experiences. The concept of the connected campus, driven by ubiquitous UX, aims to, as such, integrate these digital and physical experiences into a seamless journey (Ellucian, 2018).

Thirdly, the UX University must integrate processes such as usability testing and user satisfaction metrics into the market design of the student experience. By incorporating these processes, it is believed that moments of student frustration, such as challenges with learning materials and assignments, as well as comprehension and application of concepts, can be transformed into moments of student satisfaction (Renk, 2018). The conversion of student frustration into satisfaction is considered a key indicator of UX success, which can be measured by assessing user satisfaction with the performance of the product and conducting continuous testing on task completion time, for instance. Along these lines, UX actually begins to shape the pedagogical approach applied in the UX University. For example, according to UX principles, a satisfied student is one who can easily find the information they need, focus on learning without frustration, and excel due to clear and easily accessible resources (ibid). As follows, if a task takes a student too long to complete, they may miss out on understanding, leading to frustration and a decline in motivation.

Fourthly, the UX University generates a wealth of user feedback data by tracking every aspect of the student's experience journey. According to the UXers, by actively encouraging constant user feedback, the institution can establish tighter feedback loops and empower students to have a more significant impact on institutional design (O'Connor, 2018). This user-centric approach is supposed to be responsive to continuous and prompt user-informed improvements. It similarly argues that by following the data footprints left by students along their experience journey, the UX University becomes less self-aggrandizing and detached from reality, and more informed by data and user input, adopting a bottom-up rather than top-down approach (ibid). Furthermore, it is contended that gathering student experience data and integrating its measurement into the core organizational processes of higher education enables more effective assessment and management of staff performance. Indeed, UX emphasizes the importance of capturing and utilizing feedback data to inform progress, conduct experiments, and evaluate how successfully staff deliver student learning outcomes (ibid).

Finally, the UX University recognizes the significant role of the emotional context in the student experience journey. This emotional trajectory, as highlighted by Matt Hames (2022), an enrolment marketer in the US, can be likened to the purchase of a limited-edition Rolex watch. Like buying a luxury item, higher education is also in the business of fulfilling dreams (ibid). As Hames contends, students and their parents make decisions about an institution not solely

based on information, but also on what their choice signifies about them. This focus on emotional experience introduces contrasting factors into the decision-making process. On one hand, limited spots at top-ranked universities create a sense of scarcity that generates an emotional desire to be associated with them. On the other hand, universities outside the top rank engage in physical enrolment marketing to compete in a more intense landscape. As Hames (2022) emphasizes, regardless of the institution, there is a higher chance of attendance if students can visit the campus and experience the brand first-hand. Similar to interactions with luxury brands, these physical campus tours evoke emotions, create opportunities to dream, and offer wow moments that cannot be replicated through websites or social media alone.

However, Hames (2022) acknowledges that it may not always be feasible to bring every prospective student to campus, and enrolment marketers should embrace the potential of virtual reality and immersive media technologies to provide wow moments that simulate the experience of being on campus. At this point, it is possible to observe how UX principles have expanded into the embodied interactions users are supposed to have with so-called immersion environments. Some nascent immersive media industry companies have already attempted to pitch future business plans in the HE sector (EON Reality, 2021). Similarly, the implementation of these technologies is preceded by design research interest in user-centric processes that combine conventional techniques, like personas and scenario testing, with newer body-environment research, from environmental psychology, for example (Tvedebrink and Jelić, 2018).

The experiential turn in the university is further amplified by the arrival of academic and industry marketers assuming key managerial roles in higher education. As an illustration, in 2007, the same year that the first ever university marketing director was appointed in the UK, a significant research paper exploring "physiological observation methods" in emotional market research was published (Chamberlain & Broderick, 2007). This research, in many ways, anticipates the concerns expressed by enrolment marketers who seek to capture, quantify, and replicate the impactful "wow moments" experienced during campus visits. The study examines consumer responses to marketing stimuli at the level of physical arousal and valence, aiming to provide "valuable insights" into the correlations between consciously reported emotions and subconscious physiological arousal (210). It purports to generate a deeper understanding of the nature of emotions themselves and the effects of manipulating emotions using marketing strategies (210). Its objective is to develop future marketing techniques that can tap into the subconscious influences on consumer behaviour, particularly in situations where consumers are reluctant to disclose their behaviour or lack conscious reasons for their actions (200).

What is noteworthy about this study extends beyond its predictable claim to combine marketing and emotion psychology to access the consumer subconscious. In this context, the paper aligns with numerous tentative academic endeavours that have contributed to the dubious field of neuromarketing (Sampson, 2017). The significance of this research lies instead in the fact that one of its authors, Amanda Broderick, has since transitioned into senior management and eventually assumed the role of Vice-Chancellor (and President) of the University of East London in 2018. This is remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, as an academic with an interest in industry-focused and applied emotional consumer research, Broderick has ascended to the highest leadership position in a university operating within an increasingly competitive post-2010 student market. This convergence marks a juncture where applied academic consumer research, the marketing industry, and senior managerial oversight of the student experience seem to have merged. Secondly, it is intriguing that despite her academic and prominent managerial background, Broderick's Wikipedia page prominently positions her primarily as a "British marketer."¹

THE EVISCERATION OF STUDENT EXPERIENCE

This concluding section sets out a number of critical responses to these recent manifestations of a marketized student experience in the UX University. The aim is to briefly sketch out some approaches, and more significantly, use them to contemplate how some resilience to the eviscerated mode of student experience may be put into practice.

To begin with, it is noteworthy how the term evisceration oscillates around two contextual poles. Firstly, the concept refers to surgical and anatomical procedures that extract internal organs from bodies. Secondly, it implies various analogies and metaphors that describe the experience of being rendered empty or hollow. We might begin by considering evisceration as analogous to the hollowing out of an HE institution, stripping out its vital function as a public good. However, outside of the marketization context, there is no reason why the emptying of meaning, core values, essence, substance, integrity, or even authenticity in the HE sector should not be up for debate. Perhaps the hollowing out of institutional feelings toward a public good shaped by colonialism, classist tendencies and racial homology is in itself a progressive move.

The capitulation to market forces has been previously described through the onset of apathy. E.P. Thompson (1960), for example, positions this lack of feeling and emotion as not so much couched in absolute impotence, but brought about by those who “do not *want* to act” (ibid). This lack of action is due, in part, to a loss of confidence in collective action and an absence of belief in any “workable alternative” to going it alone (ibid). How might apathy shed some light on the potential for indifference and disengagement that students may experience as an outcome of marketization? The withdrawal from emotions and feelings are supposedly the result of a perceived lack of agency or participation, leading to a sense of societal alienation and disillusionment. But these determinants of apathy are exactly what is superficially resolved in the UX University. In short, the student experience does not become disconnected from the capacity to *interact* with the connected campus. Marketization of this kind promotes interaction. It encourages a feeling that individuals can directly affect their educational experience. On the surface, students are encouraged to customize their curriculum, interact with their lectures, and use apps to bypass bureaucratic procedures like re-enrolment. Through user-centric feedback mechanisms, co-creation, and ongoing experiential marketing campaigns, students are further encouraged to feel that their unique interests, talents, aspirations, and personal perspectives are valued or accommodated as part of a wider university community.

Modes of apathy already seem to be absorbed into the eviscerated experience of the pervasive culture of competition within academia. In addition to exacerbated economic pressures to excel academically, the need to secure prestigious internships while juggling part-time jobs, and navigating complex systems of debt, diverts energy away from broader intellectual curiosity and engagement. In other words, apathy seems to grow as an outcome of a realization that the UX University’s prioritization of superficial transactional markers of success occurs over and above any genuine love for learning. But it is the collapse of the illusion of user-centred control - a marketing fantasy, no less - that perhaps makes apathy a core component of the student experience in the UX University. As follows, a contemporary sense of apathy seems to emerge when students start to experience the lack of efficacy of the often-overstretched UX University, and its consequent inability to effect user-centred transformation or respond in a timely way to multiple user interactions.

The concept of evisceration does not need to correspond to the emptying of emotion and feeling. On the contrary, this paper has specifically borrowed from Neetu Khanna’s (2020, p. 21) “somatic logic” of affect. As follows, we have observed the hollowing out of a student experience that was once bursting with the kind of progressive visceral atmospheric necessary for rebellious transformation to occur -outside of the status quo. What remains - a student experience emotionally branded by marketers - seems to take on what Khanna calls an “aesthetics of evisceration” (110). This is emptiness composed, as such, by an “erasure of the

visceral,” a “flattening of affect,” and the “hollowing out of feeling” (ibid). But the branding of experience is actually a production of what Khanna (ibid) calls “counterprogressive emotions.” This is not so much a hollowing out as it is an elimination of viscosity under the ‘obstinate sign of “emotion”’ (122). Critically, then, we might summarize by noting how the transformation of student into customer, consumer, or user, equates to the substitution of visceral rebellion for a superficial branded emotion.

To help build resilience to emotions of this kind, critical theory must engage students in an education of the senses, drawing particular attention to Laurent Berlant’s (2011) description of the paradoxical feelings of cruel optimism. Indeed, Hansen and Mellon (2022) have already pointed to the detrimental effects of a model of student experience shaped by optimistic promotional fantasies and reinforced by an emphasis on surplus-driven performance measures, impact evaluations, satisfaction metrics, and the portrayal of students as consumers. These factors can have significant implications for the intellectual development and growth of students. As follows, the student experience can be mapped to what Berlant (2011) refers to as an attachment many individuals have to fantasies of a better life or future that are ultimately unattainable or unsustainable, yet they continue to invest in them. As Berlant (1) summarizes her concept:

A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing ... it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relations are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.

Cruel optimism captures the paradoxical relationship between student aspiration, currently informed by the emotional branding of experience by marketers, and the challenging realities encountered within the real university system. To put this another way, the UX University appears to contribute to optimistic expectations by emotionally branding experience as thriving, vibrant, supportive, engaging and transformative. However, this ignores how difficult subject matter, independent learning, bureaucratic obstacles and a lack of resources, often produces a dissonance between the illusory experience of the UX University and the cruel disenchantment of actual lived experience.

Berlant (2012) contends that we all need to learn how feelings associated with a “good life get implanted in our viscera,” and asks “how do we go about enabling changes in our visceral understanding... and our potential flourishing.” In this light, cruel optimism invites critical reflection on how emotions and feelings contribute to the idea that a marketized student experience equates to a good life. In terms of contributing to persona studies, Berlant has already offered a challenge to the ways in which academic life has become increasingly commodified around such things as CV writing (Ortiz-Vilarelle, 2022 pp. 15-16). As student experiences become bound up in pedagogies similarly determined by performance metrics and economic outcomes, regardless of approach, the critique of UX prompts a re-examination of how universities, and societies at large, currently perpetuate cruel expectations through a façade that emotionally situates users as empowered while creating the conditions that undermine flourishing and transformative visceral experiences.

END NOTES

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amanda_Broderick

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